



Press Release
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Alaska National Guard aviation support critical to Operation Arctic Care

NOME, Alaska— Pulling off the nation's largest recurring joint medical readiness exercise, Operation Arctic Care, requires significant logistical support in remote areas of western Alaska where miles of wilderness separate villages in Alaska's last frontier.

With no roads connecting villages, transporting supplies, equipment, and personnel to 16 locations in two weeks requires dedicated planning, flexibility and knowledgeable professionals – professionals like the men and women of the Alaska National Guard.

"Task force aviation is critical to our ability to travel to each village and provide medical, dental, optometry and veterinary care," said Lt. Col. Sharolyn Lange, task force medical commander for Operation Arctic Care 2012. "We can't do our job without their daily support getting supplies and personnel into each of the Arctic Care villages."

Following the arrival of Arctic Care participants April 9 on Alaska Air National Guard C-130 aircraft and a U.S. Air Force C-17 Globemaster III, Alaska Army National Guard aviators and maintenance crews have worked tirelessly to get the right people and equipment to wherever they are needed.

"On an average day we move about 40 people right now, but we're moving more supplies than people to the villages, so they have the equipment they need," said Capt. Peter Pagni, UH-60 Black Hawk pilot, Alaska Army National Guard.

Pagni, who is supporting his second Arctic Care operation, is just one of many Alaska Army National Guard aviators supporting this year's mission out of Nome and credits the support and maintenance personnel for ensuring they are mission ready each day.

"Our maintenance people work the longest days to make sure we're ready to fly," Pagni said. "We have mechanics here who are strictly ground mechanics, so when the birds are put to bed at night, the mechanics stay until they are fixed and mission capable before the next morning. It wouldn't be a mission without them."

Ensuring each of the six Black Hawk helicopters supporting Arctic Care is fully mission capable rests on the shoulders of people such as Sgt. 1st Class Corwin Viglione, B Co., 1-207th Aviation platoon sergeant, who does everything from assigning crew chiefs for various missions to inspecting each helicopter to ensure it is ready for the day's mission.

"I come in and assign flight crews for missions, but I'm also a technical inspector," Viglione said. "Any maintenance that grounded the aircraft, I will verify they did the work according to the book and verify the bird is ready for flight."

Viglione, who is originally from Kotzebue, has also seen how the benefits of Operation Arctic Care can have on a village and even his own family.

"I have family members who tell me about the help they received from the doctors, veterinarians and dentists," Viglione said. "It's nice to be a part of a mission that's helped my own family, and it feels good when pilots tell us they had a good mission because it verifies that we're doing our job well."

Flying up to six aircraft a day in support of Arctic Care operations to various villages across the Bering Sea and Norton Sound region, the biggest factor flight crews need to be prepared for is the weather.

"It can be bright and sunny right now, but in 15 minutes it can close up pretty quick, especially in Bush Alaska," Viglione said. "We make sure the birds are prepped, fueled and have the equipment they need like life vests, life rafts, immersion suits and survival equipment in case of an emergency."

"We've been fortunate this year," Pagni said. "The main concern is always the weather closing in behind you, and fortunately, we haven't had too many problems. We're able to get out there and provide the support the medical teams need for Arctic Care; and so far, it's been a great success."

With the support of the Alaska National Guard, Arctic Care 2012 military medical professionals have conducted 7,102 procedures, met with 3,979 patients and received significant training, providing excellent care to some of America's most rural citizens.

Sponsored by the Innovative Readiness Training program under the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs, Arctic Care is bringing health care and veterinary support to residents in the Bering Strait and Norton Sound regions of western Alaska from April 9-23.

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Cutlines:

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Pilots prepare to land a pair of Alaska Army National Guard UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters at the Alaska Army National Guard Army Aviation Support Facility in Nome April 17 after supporting Arctic Care operations in Brevig Mission. Photo by Maj. Guy Hayes, Alaska National Guard Public Affairs.

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A pair of Alaska Army National Guard UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters taxi after pilots land at the Alaska Army National Guard Army Aviation Support Facility in Nome April 17. Alaska National Guard aviation support is critical to moving supplies and personnel between villages during Arctic Care operations. Photo by Maj. Guy Hayes, Alaska National Guard Public Affairs.

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Staff Sgt. Stephen Elliott, crew chief, Alaska Army National Guard ties down the blades of a UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter in Nome after completing the final Arctic Care mission of the day April 17. Photo by Maj. Guy Hayes, Alaska National Guard Public Affairs.

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Alaska Army National Guard Chief Warrant Officer Jeff Arnold (left) and 2nd Lt. Justin Frush, 965th Dental Company, U.S. Army Reserves, from Texas, load medical supplies onto a truck that will be transported to villages during Operation Arctic Care. Photo by Maj. Guy Hayes, Alaska National Guard Public Affairs.

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Arctic Care participants load dental equipment onto an Alaska Army National Guard UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter in Brevig Mission April 16. The equipment was transported to Nome before heading to another village to support medical and humanitarian operations. Photo by Maj. Guy Hayes, Alaska National Guard Public Affairs.

To view a video of Operation Arctic Care aviation visit the Alaska National Guard on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CcW9V1rJG78>